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THE DIRECTOR OF
CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE

7 August 1984

National Intelligence Council

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NOTE FOR: C/NIC

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SUBJECT: IIA: Soviet Policy Toward Lebanon

The attached IIA was requested by the NSC. It was drafted by CIA/DDI (SOVA and NESA). There was no significant disagreement in the coordination process.

We plan to release the paper today if you have no objections.

Graham E. Fuller
NIO/NESA

Attachment:
IIA

It was also coordinated with NIO/USSR - NEF

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INTERAGENCY INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENT
7 August 1984

SOVIET POLICY TOWARD LEBANON

Summary

Recent Soviet contacts with Lebanese factional and governmental leaders represent an effort by Moscow to capitalize on US setbacks in Lebanon and the fluid situation there. Lebanon still does not occupy a high priority in the USSR's Middle Eastern policy, but the US military withdrawal and the formation of a new government have opened opportunities for the Soviets to build contacts there. Ideally, the Soviets would like to see some kind of leftist coalition emerge that would serve their interests independent of Syria but they are not sanguine about the prospects. Assets for the Soviets in Lebanon become more important as uncertainty about President Assad's health grows.

Moscow thus far is being careful not to overstep itself and antagonize Damascus, which jealously protects its predominant position in Lebanon. The increased Soviet activity risks reviving underlying Soviet-Syrian differences over Lebanon but such frictions are likely to be manageable. The Syrians, moreover, have the assets to undermine Soviet moves in Lebanon if necessary. The USSR is also concerned that tensions in Lebanon not increase to the point of sparking Syrian-Israeli hostilities, which would risk drawing the Soviet air defense forces in Syria into the fighting, endanger the Soviet military buildup of Syria and cause another loss of Soviet prestige.

During the next few months, the Soviets will attempt to manipulate Arab resentment over the continuing Israeli presence in southern Lebanon to embarrass the US. The renewal of the UNIFIL mandate in October provides an opportunity for such an effort. The Soviets, in principle, oppose the expansion of UNIFIL, but they may suggest to the Lebanese that they would consider the idea, calculating that if the issue is brought before the Security Council the US would be forced to veto. Moscow, however, will follow Damascus' lead on the issue, as it did when the issue was debated in the UN earlier this year. The Syrians may prefer to leave UNIFIL as is fearing that its expansion would complicate their efforts to impose a solution on Lebanon and its removal would lift some constraints on Israeli options in southern Lebanon and increase the risk of a Syrian-Israeli clash. On balance, however, they will probably not foreclose their options on this issue.

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This Interagency Intelligence Assessment was prepared under the auspices of the National Intelligence Officer for NESA. It was drafted by CIA and coordinated at the working level by CIA, DIA, State/INR, and NSA. Information as of 7 August 1984 was used in preparing the assessment.

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Leftist Lebanese factional leaders hope to use Moscow's increased interest in Lebanon to bolster their own power. Most take their direction from Damascus, however, and will consult the Syrians about greater cooperation with the Soviets. Lebanese governmental leaders probably will carefully respond to Soviet overtures for fear of a Christian backlash, and because they understand that Soviet freedom of action and leverage are distinctly limited.

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More Active Soviet Role

1. The Soviets, in an attempt to build their influence in Lebanon, have increased contacts with the Lebanese Government and with factional leaders since the US Marines withdrew from Beirut and President Gemayel abrogated the 17 May 1983 Lebanese-Israeli agreement in February and March respectively. They have:

-- Sent the CPSU's top Middle Eastern specialist, Karen Brutents, in April to Lebanon, where he met with Gemayel and other Lebanese leaders.

-- Reported formation of the Arab Democratic Union to coordinate among Soviet supported elements and the more radical elements.

-- Praised Prime Minister Karami's new government in May and sent him a message from the Soviet Council of Ministers.

-- Hosted visits in July by Druze leader Junblatt and Shia Amal chief Barri.

-- Sent the head of the Foreign Ministry's Near East Department, Vladimir Polyakov, to Beirut in early August.

Moscow may also be seeking to develop a modest military relationship with the new government. It suggested that a Soviet military official accompany Polyakov, according to the Lebanese Charge in Moscow, but Beirut refused.

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2. In addition, the USSR has kept up its traditional ties with leftist factions, such as the Lebanese Communist Party. The Soviets consult closely with LCP General Secretary Hawi and presumably encouraged the party's move in June to create a "National Democratic Front" with Junblatt's Progressive Socialist Party and other, minor, Lebanese factions.

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3. This stepped-up activity coincides with a broader Soviet effort to improve ties with other moderate Arab states, such as Jordan, Egypt and Kuwait. The Soviets are trying to capitalize on Arab frustration with US policy. Their probings in Lebanon are an attempt to take advantage of the US failure to arrange an internal Lebanese settlement. They evidently hope to rebuild the smaller leftist factions whose power has been curtailed since the beginning of the civil war and Syrian intervention in 1975-76. Moscow also appears to be seeking to develop its own ties--independent of Damascus--with the more important Lebanese factional and governmental leaders. The Kremlin has long sought independent lines of influence in Lebanon and probably believes there is a greater necessity to establish these now, with the uncertain health of Syrian President Assad and the possibility of leadership instability in Damascus. The Soviets, however, are likely to pursue such contacts carefully to avoid alienating Syria, realizing that Syrian influence with Lebanese leaders is far greater than theirs, and that the Moscow-Damascus relationship is of paramount importance.

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Lebanon in Soviet Middle Eastern Strategy

4. Lebanon is important to the Soviets because of the Palestinian and Syrian presence and the US interest in it rather than for its intrinsic significance. They do not have vital interests at stake there. They have sought influence with both the central government and the factions but have never been a major actor. Similarly, the Soviets have attempted--unsuccessfully--to play some role in the international efforts to resolve the Lebanese problem. This has stemmed more from a desire to head off a US-brokered solution and find another entree into Middle Eastern affairs than a genuine interest in getting involved in the Lebanese quagmire. The Soviets fear that successful US mediation of the Lebanese problem would enhance Washington's capabilities for brokering a broader Arab-Israeli peace settlement that left no role for the USSR.

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5. Although Moscow's long-term objective may be the establishment of a leftist, pro-Soviet regime in Lebanon, it has no illusions that this is likely to occur soon. More realistically, it probably hopes that leftist groups can increase their voice in Lebanese affairs and prod the central government toward closer ties with the USSR. A primary Soviet aim is to ensure that the government is not closely tied to the US or Israel. The Soviets have long opposed partition because they fear it would lead to the creation of Christian and Muslim mini-states dominated by Israel and Syria, respectively.

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6. The USSR has benefited, at times, from tensions in Lebanon, most notably from the fighting in and around Beirut in late 1983-early 1984 that led to the withdrawal of the MNF. The Soviets gained a propaganda windfall from the US military intervention against Lebanese factions and the eventual abrupt pull-out of the Marines. They also exploit the continuing Israeli presence in southern Lebanon to rally Arab opinion against Israel and the US.

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7. Nonetheless, turmoil in Lebanon has created almost as many problems as opportunities for Moscow, including acts of violence directed against Soviet facilities. Soviet influence in the country, never great, dwindled once the civil war began. The Soviets' relations with Damascus were severly strained by the Syrian intervention in 1976 and by their inability to prevent Israel's June 1982 defeat of Syrian forces in Lebanon. Moscow realizes that, as long as Syrian and Israeli forces sit only a short distance apart in the Bekaa Valley, the risks remain high of another war, into which it might be drawn. The presence of Soviet forces manning the SA-5 surface-to-air missiles in Syria and the likelihood that they would become involved in a major Syrian-Israeli war in Lebanon makes the limitation of tensions all the more important to the USSR. The likely future turnover of control of the SA-5s to the Syrians will decrease Soviet stakes, but the remaining extensive Soviet involvement would continue to give Moscow good reason for wanting to avoid major hostilities.

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The Syrian Factor

8. The increased Soviet commitment to Syria--reflected by the presence of the SA-5 units--highlights the central position Damascus occupies in Moscow's Middle Eastern policy and strongly suggests that the Kremlin, while probing to build independent influence in Lebanon, will continue deferring to the Assad regime there. Soviet-Syrian views on how to proceed tactically in Lebanon apparently are closer than they have been in years. The Soviets praised Syria's role at the Lausanne Conference and after in putting together a government of national unity. Soviet officials also have emphasized in public over the last year that Damascus has legitimate security interests in Lebanon--something Moscow has not made explicit in the past.

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9. Soviet-Syrian differences persist, however, over broader strategy toward Lebanon. A Soviet Defense Ministry briefing earlier this year, for example, reportedly stated that Moscow still does not want to see Lebanon dominated by Damascus and hopes that Syrian troops eventually are removed. The Soviets evidently also have made it clear to Assad that they do not consider themselves obligated to protect the Syrian presence in Lebanon. During periods of tensions, Soviet public statement of support for Syria invariably omit any hint that the Kremlin will defend the Syrian presence there.

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10. Future Soviet-Syrian frictions might arise over a number of issues concerning Lebanon. Syria's desire to involve the United States in brokering alternate security arrangements for southern Lebanon could lead to the most significant differences. Moscow would not want to see Washington score a major diplomatic success while the USSR was left on the sidelines and thus might press the Syrians to move discussion of the issue to a UN forum. The Soviets would have little choice, however, but to acquiesce if Syria proved determined to involve the US, and, in this case, they could only hope that Washington's efforts backfire and lead to another setback to US interests in Lebanon.

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11. Additional frictions in Soviet-Syrian relations over Lebanon, while unlikely to be major, could develop over the issue of expanding or curtailing the mandate of UN forces in Lebanon. The Syrians also would not countenance an aggressive Soviet effort to develop an independent power base in Lebanon and probably would use their own Lebanese surrogates to hinder Soviet attempts. Moscow, in turn, would argue against a Syrian decision to put significantly greater pressure on Israeli forces in Lebanon, fearing this would risk renewed hostilities.

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Lebanese Response to Soviet Overtures

12. The Lebanese set policy only after close consultation with the Syrians, and talks between Beirut and Damascus presumably cover Soviet-Lebanese ties. Junblatt and Barri, for example, stopped off in Damascus after their separate visits to Moscow in July. Government leaders in Beirut do not appear to be alarmed by Soviet contacts in Lebanon and probably view Soviet activities as part of a tandem effort with Syria to impose stability and get Israeli troops out of the south.

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13. Karami's recent public statement that he has no qualms about purchasing Soviet military equipment probably is a ploy to encourage the US to be more forthcoming in training and equipping the Lebanese Armed Forces. Lebanese leaders are sensitive to the potential Christian backlash if the government moves too far in its ties with Moscow. In any case, apart from ammunition for a few Soviet artillery pieces acquired in the 1970s, the LAF has no current need for Soviet arms, except as a political gesture to assert Lebanon's non-aligned status.

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Implications for the United States

14. Lebanon is unlikely to become a high priority area for Moscow. Soviet policy in the Middle East will continue to place greater emphasis on Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Egypt, the Palestinian issue and the broader Arab-Israeli peace process. We can expect the Soviets, however, to continue to be more active in Lebanese affairs than in recent years, especially if the Lebanese Government responds positively to their approaches. Arab diplomats in Moscow believe that Karami will soon visit the USSR, although this has not been confirmed. The Soviets will attempt to exploit such contacts, probably with minimal success, to undercut US-Lebanese relations and increase pressure for Israeli withdrawal from the south. They will portray the continued Israeli presence to Arab audiences as a result of US designs to prevent the creation of a unified "Arab Lebanon" and will attempt to claim credit for any Israeli withdrawal.

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15. Moscow may well use the issue of UNIFIL's presence in the south to embarass the US. UNIFIL's six-month mandate expires on 19 October, and, as usual, its future will be debated in the UN in the preceding weeks. During the last mandate renewal debate in April, the Soviets attempted to limit extension of UNIFIL's mandate to three months and hedged on the Lebanese Government's idea of expanding UNIFIL's area of operation. They let the US bear the onus, however, for scuttling the expansion idea, and, ultimately, the mandate was renewed with no changes for the usual six months. The Kremlin is again likely to try to manuever the US into appearing obstructive. Although the Soviets oppose, in principle, the use of UN forces in internal security situations, they might, for instance, hint to Lebanese leaders that they would favorably consider the idea of expanding UNIFIL in the south, a scheme for which Nabih Barri has been lobbying.

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16. The Soviets, even if they decided that Barri's scheme was the best way to undercut the US and get the Israelis out, would not seriously push for it unless Syria agreed--which is highly unlikely. Recent reports indicate Damascus wants the Lebanese Army to expand its area of control and eventually draw up a detailed plan for deployment to the south in order to deprive Israel of the justification for its presence. Conversely, the Syrians probably would also oppose a plan to end the UNIFIL mandate before the LAF is ready for an expanded role. The Syrians' past support for UNIFIL suggests they believe its presence imposes some constraints on Israeli policy options.

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17. Despite a probable Soviet aim of increasing influence in Lebanon without butting heads with Syria, Moscow's more active stance is bound to lead to some frictions with Damascus. We believe, however, that these will remain manageable, primarily because the Soviets are likely to back off rather than risk souring their relationship with the Assad regime. The one issue with the potential to create serious differences is a Syrian willingness to engage the US in arranging a Lebanese settlement. Moscow has had to countenance this in the past, and the extent of its concern will depend upon how well Damascus keeps it informed about such negotiations with the US. Whatever their concern, the Soviets would be hard pressed to block a US-Syrian agreement on Lebanon.

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